



INTO THE STACKS

Children Saving Children: Humanitarianism, World War I, and American Childhood

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In January 1918, Teddy Brown from Fairbanks, Alaska, was coming home. As he entered the house, the ten-year-old boy slammed the door shut, stormed into the living room, and demanded that his parents put on their coats. Teddy solemnly proclaimed that he had heard harrowing stories about French children's sufferings and wanted to contribute a weekly donation of seventy-five cents in order to help "a brother" in France. After listening to his pleas, Teddy's parents eventually came to endorse his chosen mission. The family left the house, venturing out into the sub-zero temperatures, and headed to the local committee of the Fatherless Children of France Society (FCFS).¹ By the time Teddy made his commitment, thousands of other American children had already "adopted" orphans in France.

Founded in 1915 by Émile Deutsch de la Meurthe, a Jewish, Paris-based industrialist, the FCFS was fully incorporated in New York in 1916. With 140 local units scattered across the United States, Americans had adopted more than 60,000 French orphans by summer 1918.² The campaign to provide financial assistance to French children whose fathers had been killed during the war used the terms *orphan* to denote the fatherless and *adoption* to describe the commitment to send funds on a regular basis. FCFS agents matched children with American subscribers, then facilitated and encouraged communication between "foster" children and parents. A donation of \$36.50 a year was all that was needed to provide for the material needs of an orphan, and only children under sixteen were eligible to be cared for by the FCFS (Figure 1).³ The assistance made it possible for the widowed mothers to care for their children. Indeed, "adopted children" were to stay with their mothers in France; under no circumstances were they to set sail for the United States.

Members of the FCFS published calls for help in which they described the appalling living conditions of French children sheltered in ruined houses, on the verge of starvation, mourning the loss of their fathers, with mothers unable to provide for the family. Drawings featuring emaciated children in ragged clothing appeared next to published pleas for assistance, emphasizing the plight of the destitute victims of warfare (Figure 2). In matching donors and orphans, the FCFS made participation personal. Donors were not just supporting children in need, but "their" children. Through sponsorship, American adults found an outlet for tender parenting

The author would like to express his deep gratitude to Darren Dochuk and Sarah B. Snyder for their detailed comments on earlier drafts and their ongoing support and interest. This piece has greatly benefited from their guidance.

¹"Orphan Fund Report," *Weekly Alaska Citizen* (Alaska), Jan. 7, 1918, 8.

²"Helps Fatherless French Children," *Pleasantville Press* (New Jersey), Mar. 2, 1918, 8; Report of the Operations of the Fatherless Children of France Society (Oct. 1915–Aug. 1916), Folder 4, Box 2, Fatherless Children of France Society, Albert J. Earling Papers (1885–1948), Wisconsin Historical Society Library and Archives, Milwaukee, WI [hereafter AEP].

³Fatherless Children of France, Condensed Report 1917, Box 1, Mrs. Leland E. Cofer Papers, Stanford University Library, Stanford, CA. The annual subscription of \$36.50 would be the equivalent of \$978 today.

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Figure 1. Poster from the New York headquarters of the FCFS (Digital Collection, Posters Collection, Hoover Institution Library and Archives, Stanford, California).

that may have eluded them in more immediate familial contexts. In some cases, such tender parenting led to more lavish displays of nurture, such as the bequeathing of entire fortunes to designated (lucky) French boys and girls.⁴

Later on, in October 1916, the Junior Committee of the Fatherless Children of France Society was founded specifically to reach out to American boys and girls. That happened months before the foundation of the attention-grabbing Junior Red Cross.⁵ FCFS members distributed pamphlets and letters to public schools across the United States. From New York, in

⁴Report from Seligmann-Lui (General Secretary of the Franco-American Fraternity), Apr. 28, 1926, *Fraternité Franco-Américaine* (1926), Papers of Paul Painlevé, 313AP/224/487, National Archives of France, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, France.

⁵Julia F. Irwin, “Teaching Americanism with World Perspective’: The Junior Red Cross in the U.S. Schools from 1917 to the 1920s,” *History of Education Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (Aug. 2013): 255.

her capacity as chair of the national headquarters of the FCFS, Katherine Walter Brewster forwarded instructions to school teachers, explaining how an entire class could adopt a child. “We Want You to Adopt a French Orphan!” were empowering words aimed at arousing the interest of America’s youth.⁶ To boost pride in the assistance given to France’s children, the FCFS framed certificates to hang in prominent places in classrooms.⁷

The strength of the FCFS lay in its ability to enact a form of relief that both attended to the needs of orphans and filled an emotional void in the hearts of Americans, regardless of age. For example, whereas appeals directed to adults primarily focused on the humanitarian reasons for sponsoring an orphan, those directed to children promised friendship with a French “brother” or “sister.” Moreover, the FCFS tried to make deliberate matches between an individual (or a group of individuals) and a French child, which added an emotional component to the humanitarian mission aimed at France’s needy populations. In doing so, the FCFS staved off what Susan D. Moeller has provocatively called “compassion fatigue.”⁸ Indeed, as the conflict dragged on, relief agencies’ constant pleading for support created the opposite, unfortunate effect: waning attention from an overwhelmed public. The FCFS, in contrast, saw its fortunes continue to rise (Figure 3). By 1921, no less than 300,000 orphans had been adopted by Americans, further evidence of the effectiveness of tapping the hearts and minds of American children.⁹ Targeting American children and getting them involved in the rescue of needy French orphans was an effective means to combat indifference and monopolize their American parents’ attention. In addition, once a child had been sponsored, its survival depended entirely on his or her “godparent,” which further strengthened a sense of moral duty. Arguably, sponsoring a French orphan introduced American children to a way of thinking and acting that may have stayed with them for a lifetime, creating a generation of humanitarians.

The Making of American Patriots

As staggering as the adoption of 300,000 French children was, the American response to the FCFS’s campaign remains largely forgotten in the annals of early twentieth-century U.S. history. This absence is not just glaring, but unfortunate, for it not only prevents us from fully appreciating a critical moment in the development of American humanitarianism, but also clouds over a fascinating and fruitful angle of inquiry, analysis, and pedagogy in U.S. cultural history writ large.

Indeed, at the center of the story of the FCFS rests a core takeaway for scholars who seek to write and teach American history effectively: children matter. As scholars, we do not simply miss a key dimension of American civic and global engagement when we brush children to the side; by marginalizing them in our accounts, we in fact skew the entire record. As I outline below, by placing children at the heart of our histories of World War I and the Wilsonian moment, and by seeing them not just as passive victims but as active agents of change, we gain a fresh perspective into the intricate workings of American political ideology and institution building on an international stage. Held up as ambassadors for the American way, children performed key civic functions as exemplars for U.S. patriotism and imperialism, and as conduits for the nation’s perceived manifest destiny. Amid the violence of World War I—the most critical period in the evolution of American humanitarian aid—American children not

⁶“We Want You to Adopt a French Orphan,” undated, Box 3, Records and Accounts for the Fatherless Children of France Society (1918–1920), Charles B. Rogers Papers (1824–1960), Wisconsin Historical Society Library and Archives, Whitewater, WI [hereafter CRP].

⁷“Directions to Sub-Committee Chairmen,” undated, Box 3, Records and Accounts for the Fatherless Children of France Society (1918–1920), CRP.

⁸Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* (New York, 1999).

⁹Letter from Émile Deutsch de la Meurthe to the American Executive Committee, Apr. 1921, Alvin M. Bentley Papers (1911–2007), 85746Aa2, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI [hereafter ABP].

THE FATHERLESS CHILDREN OF FRANCE

BRANCH OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR THE RELIEF OF FRENCH WAR ORPHANS INC.

AMERICAN HEADQUARTERS, PARIS HEADQUARTERS,
 665 FIFTH AVENUE, 110 RUE DE GRENELLE
 NEW YORK CITY

NEW YORK COMMITTEE

Miss **LUISITA LELAND**
 CHAIRMAN Five Sixty Three Park Avenue

TELEPHONE: PLAZA 7581

Mrs. **J. BORDEN HARRIMAN** Mrs. **DOUGLAS ROBINSON** Mr. **WALTER W. PRICE**
 VICE-CHAIRMAN Secretary TREASURER
 Colony Club Nine East Sixty Third Street 111 Broadway



AMERICANS!

We were the First Republic and France gave us Help!
TO-DAY FRANCE IS FIGHTING FOR HER LIFE!
AND FOR NATIONAL FREEDOM.

Her orphans need our help.
FRANCE IS LOOKING TO US!

¹²⁵ In ~~140~~ of the most important cities of the United States, active Committees of the **Fatherless Children of France**, have been working during 12 months, to raise funds to support the orphans of the War in France in their own homes. We are now caring for about 20,000 children, and have 73,000 more names and addresses on our waiting list.

WE WANT YOU TO ADOPT A LITTLE CHILD OF FRANCE!

By supplementing the 10c. a day given by the French Government to each War orphan, "**The Fatherless Children of France**" saves the children, giving aid at the following rate:

| | |
|--------|------------------------------------------------|
| 10c. | keeps a child for 1 day in it's mother's Home. |
| \$3.00 | " " " " 1 month " " " " |
| 36.50 | " " " " 1 year " " " " |
| 73.00 | " " " " 2 years " " " " |

Any subscriber, on sending cheque to our Treasurer, will receive if desired the name and address of the child to whom the money is sent direct from our Paris Headquarters, by Postal Money Order; the money goes through no hands but our own. The child thus "adopted", receives the name and address of it's benefactor, and is expected to write a note of thanks, or if too young, the acknowledgement is sent by the mother.

THROUGH THIS PERSONAL LINK, WE ARE BUILDING UP BETWEEN OUR TWO PEOPLES, A LASTING AND UNBREAKABLE FRIENDSHIP.

Cheques should be made payable to : **Luisita Leland**
 W. W. Price, Treasurer, Chairman.
 111 Broadway. 563 Park Ave.,

Figure 2. Poster from the New York headquarters of the FCFS (Albert J. Earling Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Library and Archives, Milwaukee, Wisconsin).

only provided inspiration for civic action at home and abroad but also helped facilitate it by making their classrooms (and their community organizations and churches) responsive to the plight of Europe's children, and by saving their pennies (and urging their parents to do

the same) to aid, indeed save, their French counterparts. By revisiting this history of childhood activism, we also open up new opportunities for effective pedagogy. As I suggest in the final section, there is no better way to invest students in the early twentieth-century chronicles of global crisis, war, and American internationalism than by putting young people at the heart of the matter.

As the nation that fashioned the concept of “manifest destiny,” it is perhaps no surprise that American political culture transmitted humanitarian codes and values to its youth from an early age. As Brian Rouleau explains, twentieth-century children’s literature and popular culture permitted the U.S. government to “politicize children’s entertainment as part of an effort to purchase their loyalty and assent.”¹⁰ In order to teach children that they belonged to a great altruistic nation, they needed to be fully integrated within the imagined national community. Rouleau has shown, for example, that children’s literature, such as comic books and magazines, sought “to create a colonially inflected youth culture in the United States.”¹¹ Through popular culture, children learned the well-established national narrative, according to which, for example, Native Americans (the “Indians”) had to be driven out in order to expand U.S. territory.¹² As a nation of missionaries and pilgrims, the United States had always placed special importance on children as vanguards of Christian nationalism and global engagement. So whereas European nations still conceived of childhood circa 1900 as a period of innocence and insouciance, Americans empowered their children and placed heavier burdens on them by stressing their moral duty to help uplift a lost world through witness and example.

Extant scholarship has not yet fully recognized this point. Indeed, those who study American humanitarianism and World War I tend to focus on the mobilization of adults to assist needy civilian populations or injured soldiers. For example, in *Yanks behind the Lines: How the Commission for Relief in Belgium Saved Millions from Starvation during World War I* (2020), Jeffrey Miller demonstrates how Germany’s invasion of Belgium in 1914 spurred what was an unprecedented humanitarian response to assist a neutral country. American men and women mobilized to provide material and financial help to Belgian civilian populations.¹³ Herbert Hoover’s Commission for Relief in Belgium tapped Americans’ strong intent to aid the destitute populations in Europe and act in what U.S. President Woodrow Wilson called a “spirit of absolute disinterestedness.”¹⁴ Scholars specializing in conflict and humanitarianism, meanwhile, tend to portray children as victims—solely as recipients and never as agents of humanitarian aid. Indeed, in the aftermath of World War I, various communities collectively rallied to rescue children in Armenia, Serbia, Poland, and Romania. In *Budapest’s Children: Humanitarian Relief in the Aftermath of the Great War*, Friederike Kind-Kovács deftly describes the dynamics between local Hungarian organizations and foreign humanitarian donors and explains how the suffering of Budapest’s children was used to mobilize Americans (and Europeans). Though central to Kind-Kovács’s story, children themselves serve principally as conduits for ideas and actions advanced by more senior people with clout.¹⁵

The same tendency is evidenced in works where sacred and secular dynamics loom large. Both Bruno Cabanes’s *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism, 1918–1924* and

¹⁰Brian Rouleau, “Children Are Hiding in Plain Sight in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations,” *Modern American History* 2, no. 3 (Oct. 2019): 371.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 370.

¹²Brian Rouleau, “How the West Was Fun: Children’s Literature and Frontier Mythmaking toward the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 49–74.

¹³Jeffery B. Miller, *Yanks behind the Lines: How the Commission for Relief in Belgium Saved Millions from Starvation during World War I* (Lanham, MD, 2020).

¹⁴Woodrow Wilson to the American Red Cross Society, Dec. 9, 1914, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 31, September 6–December 31, 1914, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ, 1966), 430.

¹⁵Friederike Kind-Kovács, *Budapest’s Children: Humanitarian Relief in the Aftermath of the Great War* (Bloomington, IN, 2022).

Davide Rodogno's *Night on Earth: A History of International Humanitarianism in the Near East, 1918–1930* reveal that in Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the Near East, American and European secular as well as religious organizations coordinated efforts to feed hungry civilians and implement rehabilitation programs.¹⁶ Americans' generosity toward foreign children reached all parts of the European continent. American churches also played an important role in galvanizing American youth during and after World War I. In Bismarck, North Dakota, for instance, Sunday schools organized to help Armenian children.¹⁷ Indeed, although scholarly narratives tend to center on the "increasing secularization of humanitarian action during the Progressive Era," Heather D. Curtis has highlighted that, at the turn of the century, American evangelicals engaged in large-scale aid projects, projecting humanitarian relief abroad and rescuing needy populations.¹⁸ A religious—predominantly Christian—U.S. imperialism paralleled a more secular form of U.S. imperialism; despite harboring slightly different motivations, both systems urged children to be shining examples of the role their country ought to play in the world and how it could (and should) project American values abroad.¹⁹

Scholars have long identified how the fate of foreign children nourished "the geopolitics of compassion in the United States."²⁰ These studies too, however, advance the same familiar and dominant trope: American adults are the rescuers and foreign children are the rescuees. "It is as if human experience," Rouleau deplures, "only begins with the age of majority."²¹ Rouleau has provocatively opined that children are hiding "in plain sight" in the history of U.S. foreign relations, urging historians of U.S. politics, diplomacy, and international relations to reorient their treatment of American history and include the nation's youth. Children, he argues, must be regarded not simply as passive characters of American society "but rather as actors themselves."²²

Rouleau is right: any rendering of modern U.S. history that does not center children's participation in humanitarian action is seriously flawed. This is of crucial importance for our understanding of World War I, which indeed served as the harbinger of a new form of American humanitarianism.

Julia Irwin's book *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation's Humanitarian Awakening* is a starting point for fusing studies of American humanitarianism and research on childhood and conflict against the backdrop of the first global conflict. Irwin briefly discusses the creation of the Junior Division of the American Red Cross following the United States's entry into the war in April 1917. Wilson hoped to target the nation's schools and turn its 22 million schoolchildren into humanitarian fieldworkers who would eventually join the newly organized Junior Red Cross.²³ Its establishment reflected Wilson's desire to ensure that American children would play their part in their nation's humanitarian action. Through public calls from high-ranking leaders and ongoing school-based activities, children were invited to raise money and produce relief supplies for the Allied nations. Involving

¹⁶Bruno Cabanes, *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism, 1918–1924* (Cambridge, UK, 2014); and Davide Rodogno, *Night on Earth: A History of International Humanitarianism in the Near East, 1918–1930* (Cambridge, UK, 2021).

¹⁷"North Dakota Sunday Schools Help Armenia," *Bismarck Tribune* (North Dakota), Oct. 21, 1918, 8.

¹⁸Heather D. Curtis, *Holy Humanitarians: American Evangelicals and Global Aid* (Cambridge, MA, 2018), 5.

¹⁹David I. Macleod, *Building Character in the American Boy: The Boy Scouts, YMCA, and Their Forerunners, 1870–1920* (Madison, WI, 1983); and Michael G. Thompson, *For God and Globe: Christian Internationalism in the United States between the Great War and the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY, 2015).

²⁰Anita Casavantes Bradford, *Suffer the Little Children: Child Migration and the Geopolitics of Compassion in the United States* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2022).

²¹Rouleau, "Children Are Hiding in Plain Sight," 367.

²²*Ibid.*, 388.

²³Julia F. Irwin, *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation's Humanitarian Awakening* (Oxford, UK, 2013), 77–8.

children and thus the adults around them in the aid effort helped to mobilize the entire population behind a shared cause, which in turn helped to reorient it away from its isolationist stance.

The call to integrate American children in our accounts of wartime humanitarian efforts echoes Rouleau's forceful charge. In *Empire's Nursery: Children's Literature and the Origins of the American Century*, he unveils how juvenile literature shaped American children's collective imaginary and infused in them a sense of devotion to American imperialism.²⁴ Consequently, any study related to humanitarianism and children at the beginning of the twentieth century can no longer neglect the underlying imperial goals of the various actors. From the perspective of Wilson, propaganda directed at children allowed his administration to tug at young hearts and garner more support from adults. It also originated, however, from a political interest in educating children and thus fostering in future generations of U.S. citizens the notion of American exceptionalism.

Of course, there was no shortage of irony in Wilson's purview. At the same time that he and his administration urged Americans to rescue foreign European populations abroad, and leaned on heartfelt messaging to generate such action, immigrant communities inside American borders were increasingly looked upon with suspicion, their adults *and* children were seen as scourges to "100% Americanism." Adam Goodman argues that World War I contributed to heightened xenophobia and forced Americans to ponder what being American actually meant. Federal authorities such as the newly established Bureau of Naturalization designed a number of educational strategies to inculcate newly arrived immigrants in the hope that they would "become" Americans.²⁵ Any study focused on American humanitarianism during World War I needs to take account of Goodman's research and claim that the conflict triggered an identity crisis in the United States that touched every level of daily life, including that of the home, where children from foreign shores came to recognize their tenuous status in a society that could just as easily shun as embrace them.

American Imperialism and Humanitarianism

Humanitarian action has never been and can never be wholly politically neutral. Since at least the early republic, humanitarian organizations have operated as strategic assets for governments, agents of colonial expansion and exploitation, and facilitators of imperial goals. During and after World War I, humanitarian action very clearly facilitated a more aggressive brand of American imperialism. The years 1914–1918 marked the emergence of a new American hegemon that harbored few misgivings about extending its global power through humanitarian relief initiatives. In the aftermath of the global conflict, American intervention in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, for instance, encompassed an ideological battle against Bolshevism that made bread and butter, not bullets, the essence of Washington's aggressive diplomacy. As Bruno Cabanes demonstrates, the United States hoped that food could be used as "a weapon against communism" to destabilize the Soviet regime and bring an end to a nascent empire that could threaten America's standing in the world.²⁶

Considering the deliberate intent with which the U.S. deployed its bread-and-butter strategy in its global engagement during the first great war, scholars specializing in the mid-twentieth century may have overemphasized the unique dimensions of American cultural diplomacy and youth activism in Dwight D. Eisenhower's day. It is true that after World War II,

²⁴Brian Rouleau, *Empire's Nursery: Children's Literature and the Origins of the American Century* (New York, 2021).

²⁵Adam Goodman, "Defining American: The Bureau of Naturalization's Attempt to Standardize Citizenship Education and Inculcate 'the Soul of America' in Immigrants during World War I," *Journal of American History* 109, no. 2 (Sep. 2022): 324.

²⁶Cabanes, *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism*, 195.

Chicago Committee
of the
**Fatherless Children
of France**
Committee

Last year you "adopted" a little French child. Perhaps you have felt that the end of the war would make it possible to withdraw this help, that peace would bring prosperity to the world and plenty to victorious France. Instead

**FRANCE NEEDS OUR HELP NOW
AS NEVER BEFORE**

Fifty-seven per cent of her men under thirty are dead, 250,000 of her homes are utterly destroyed. Her richest manufacturing districts are heaps of twisted iron, her coal mines are subterranean lakes, mile after mile of fertile farms are now deserts of dust.

For five years the women and children of France have borne the burden of war without flinching. The mothers have made every sacrifice; they have worked to take the dead fathers' place, they have denied themselves necessities that their children might have almost enough to eat and reasonably warm clothes to wear. Peace finds them reduced to penury, physically weakened, mentally depressed. They do not ask us for further help but they wist-

Enclosed please find \$ _____ as { payment in full / partial payment } for the renewed support of _____ Committee

I agree to send the remainder in { monthly / quarterly } payments.
I { have / have not } heard from the child or its mother.

Name _____
Address _____

PLEASE MAKE CHECK PAYABLE TO _____
Chairman
Treasurer

RENEWAL PLEDGE
whom I wish to help for another year.

Figure 3. Renewal Pledge Letter from the Chicago Committee of the FCFS (SC.3569, Ladies Literary Circle of Dwight, Minutes 1918–1920, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Springfield, Illinois).

people-to-people programs and peace-building initiatives involved children and shaped the outlook of future generations of American men and women.²⁷ And American children then found themselves foregrounded in wider international campaigns against health crises and disease. Yet, it was Wilson's presidency during World War I that undeniably ushered in a new era of family-focused diplomacy in U.S. foreign policy initiatives. Those who study foreign relations would do well, in other words, to scrutinize the Wilsonian moment and the decade that followed as the pivot point when children gained greater import in U.S. foreign relations and peace building.

Still, the Cold War period certainly deserves scrutiny. Curiously enough, it is the evolution of the comic book industry that might best reveal how young people were enlisted in this national project. The Cold War triggered a more aggressive brand of imperialistic propaganda toward children, evident in the comic books, through which American youth were schooled to believe they were "key players in the broader struggle against the forces of oppression."²⁸ Amid the existential struggle with a relentless Soviet foe, this shift in American popular culture seemed

²⁷Anna Fett, "U.S. People-to-People Programs: Cold War Cultural Diplomacy to Conflict Resolution," *Diplomatic History* 45, no. 4 (Sep. 2021): 714–42; Sara Fieldston, *Raising the World: Child Welfare in the American Century* (Cambridge, MA, 2015); and Liisa Malkki, "Children, Humanity, and the Infantilization of Peace," in *In the Name of Humanity: The Government of Threat and Care*, ed. Ilana Feldman and Miriam Ticktin (Durham, NC, 2010), 58–85.

²⁸Rouleau, "Children Are Hiding in Plain Sight," 372.

natural and necessary: after all, the very survival of the United States seemed to be at stake. “It is with children’s cultures that new sensibilities evolve,” claims Steven Mintz, suggesting the bottom-up process this entailed.²⁹ The atrocities committed during World War II and the subsequent expansion of the Soviet Union alerted Americans that their previous humanitarian interventions had been pointless and should have been backed by military and economic might. In other words, at the highest level in Washington, DC, people knew that the adults who governed the United States between 1914 and 1939 had not been sufficiently “schooled” by the literature of their childhood. Children’s literature published before 1939 had been judged “too soft” and responsible for the inertia of American leaders between 1919 and 1945. Consequently, a more aggressive popular culture developed after World War II to justify the struggle against the Soviet Union morally and politically as well as shape the psyches of millions of American children.

Classrooms as Historical Objects

Beyond being of immediate interest to academics specializing in diplomacy, international relations, and transnational history, research on American children and humanitarianism can further studies on childhood in wartime, and help historians determine more precisely what American children knew and understood of World War I (or, by extension, other conflicts). Here the classroom needs to be centered in the picture. As much as popular cultural mediums such as comic books and children’s literature have served to inculcate kids (white and middle class especially) in the ways of nation building, it is the public school system—that realm in which most children spend most of their early years—in which full indoctrination takes place.³⁰

Classrooms therefore need to be envisaged as objects of historical research. Classrooms are microcosms where children learn and develop strong senses of belonging and citizenship, as well as internalize the meanings and process the effects of human conflict. When their nation participates in external campaigns, children are haunted by the possibility that their fathers might not return alive; under such duress, the schoolhouse becomes a site of comfort as well as instruction, of more support as well as academic rigor. Research dedicated to the analysis of American children’s reactions to war and, by extension, involvement in humanitarianism and peace building, therefore, necessitates the foregrounding of their experiences as pupils and junior patriots.

Though focused on a different national experience, French historians have played a pioneering role, in this regard, and have conducted considerable research on France’s children during World War I. They have found that classrooms were indeed crucial environments for the mobilization of a wartime culture.³¹ As a country partially occupied on its northern borders and engaged in a total war, France leaned heavily—desperately—on its state-run educational institutions to shape the psyche of its young generations. School books, magazines, and newspapers deployed in these spaces cultivated a mental landscape in which the enemy was repeatedly depicted as inhuman, ferocious, and bloodthirsty.³² Through games, songs, and lectures, meanwhile, French pupils gradually adopted a set of prescribed codes and learned how to participate (peacefully) in the protection of their country and furtherance of the patriotic cause. As highlighted by Manon Pignon in *Allons enfants de la patrie. Génération Grande Guerre*, during World War I, France’s children imitated the demeanor of soldiers, dressed as infantrymen in large uniforms and loose boots, and imagined themselves defeating the enemy on the

²⁹Steven Mintz, “Why the History of Childhood Matters,” *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 5, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 22.

³⁰James E. Block, *The Crucible of Consent: American Child Rearing and the Forging of Liberal Society* (Cambridge, MA, 2012).

³¹Cabanes, *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism*, 283.

³²Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *La guerre des enfants, 1914–1918* (Paris, 2004), 108–28.

Somme or at Verdun.³³ British children, too, through the Boy Scouts Association and the Girl Guides Association, participated in the defense of their island: they packed clothing for the troops, and they guarded railway stations, water reservoirs, as well as telephone and telegraph lines. British children were even encouraged to emulate a doll, the “Unconscious Doll Exerciser” (modeled upon a British soldier of the conflict), and strive to build up their physical strength.³⁴

Across the Atlantic Ocean, Americans could understand the conflict only secondhand—initially through newspapers, public lectures, and then (after the United States entered the war in April 1917), via cinema newsreels, letters, and accounts from their loved ones in service in Europe. What information did American school teachers transmit to their pupils? Did Allied propaganda portraying German troops as “barbarians” echo in the corridors of public schools in Pennsylvania, Oregon, and Texas? Generative questions such as these can open up new pedagogical opportunities to situate institutional structures of schooling at the heart of students’ understanding of wartime culture and rising tides of patriotism, nationalism, militarization, and xenophobia. They can also spark interdisciplinary dialogue among students that draws on insights from anthropology, politics, history, and sociology to describe, with texture, the lived experience of young people during war—be they American born or recent arrivals from Europe. There are potentials to manage scale as well. Instead of overwhelming students with facts and figures and major developments related to war, historians interested in teaching global conflicts (be it World War I, World War II, the Korean War, or the Vietnam War) might start out with the micro-analysis of a particular local classroom in order to chart the psychological impact of war and the traumas inflicted on American children when fathers or siblings went off to war, mothers struggled to keep homelife stable, and families were strained. The challenge to this approach, of course, pertains to material resources. Local schools are not necessarily known for being efficient repositories of archival records that academics can easily access for research and teaching purposes. Still, however scant and scattered they may be, sources such as yearbooks, students’ letters and notebooks, as well as records of school-sponsored rallies and fundraising activities, along with school and local newspapers’ coverage of war, could sufficiently illuminate connections between the classroom and the battlefield.

Kindergarten, primary, and secondary school teachers (as well as academic historians) can always undertake some sleuthing on their own that immerses their students in local history. Those who attend Staunton High School (in Staunton, Virginia) and Thomas Jefferson High School (in Alexandria, Virginia), for instance, might wish to embark on a project aimed at tracking down archival materials related to the twenty French orphans collectively adopted by their community’s families in the early twentieth century.³⁵ In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, pupils could search for the correspondence between students at West Division High School and their adopted “brother” Louis Menguy.³⁶ Students in Kalamazoo, Michigan, should know that during the conflict the local Burdick Street School sponsored two-and-half-year-old Pierre Moreau.³⁷ Such investigation would give students a window into America’s humanitarian contributions during World War I and thus reinforce their sense of belonging to an “exceptionally altruistic nation.”³⁸ Indeed, the deployment of this approach in the classroom could also raise possibilities for nurturing an awareness among pupils of the manifold, complex ways that the

³³Manon Pignon, *Allons enfants de la patrie. Génération Grande Guerre* (Paris, 2012), 58–100.

³⁴Ten Ways Children Took Part in the First World War, Imperial War Museum London, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/10-ways-children-took-part-in-the-first-world-war> (accessed Sept. 9, 2022).

³⁵“Appeals for Donations for French Orphans,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Dec. 16, 1917, 16.

³⁶Letter from Mrs. Harriett Fitch to the Girls’ Club (Chairwoman of the Milwaukee Committee), 1918, Folder 3, Box 2, Fatherless Children of France, AEP.

³⁷“Children Adopt Orphan,” *South Bend News-Times*, May 9, 1917, 16.

³⁸David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (Oxford, UK, 1980), 153.

United States has always engaged the world beneficently as well as out of self-interest, militarily and politically, but also through private and charitable channels.

Furthermore, given the central importance of the United States in the twenty-first century's geopolitical climate, a refocusing on children as agents of history could be a means to foster a greater sense of responsibility among future leaders of American society, not just to the nation but also to the global community. Such pedagogy might train a new generation of Americans to shun the polarizing partisanship and bitter populism of our moment, and embrace anew their nation's long-held sense of "manifest destiny"—not as justification for neo-imperial ambitions, but as an imperative for Washington and all citizens, young as well as old, to lead in the remaking of a better, more connected world. Speaking as a scholar committed to this end, I think adoption of such curricula is at least worth a try.

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